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Articles

**LABOUR PROBLEMS IN
RHODESIA**

Contributors

Farm Labourers in Rhodesia

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FARM LABOURERS IN RHODESIA

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Introduction

Although a few studies of urban workers in Rhodesia have now been done, farm workers have received little attention. We know very little about farm workers, that is, their social composition, family life, mobility, attitudes to work, wages, and other related matters. With this in mind four European farms were studied in 1971.¹ This is not a large-scale study designed to produce a great deal of statistical evidence for the country-wide illumination of a series of specific questions. Rather, it is an exploratory study intended, at best, to suggest areas of interest for those concerned with the study of rural social and economic life which might, at a later date, be examined in the light of more specific questions suitable for more comprehensive enquiry.²

Three hundred and forty-three people worked on the four farms studied. The total population including spouses of the workers and their children and dependants was 1 072. Farm No. 1 which had a population of 116 is situated in the district of Mazoe about 32 kilometres from Salisbury. It is a 'mixed' farm, the two main activities being dairying and maize production. Farm No. 2 is in the Norton area about 76 kilometres from Salisbury. This used to be a tobacco farm but the main farming activity in 1971 was maize production. Various types of livestock are also reared. The total population was 159. The farm had a small junior primary school with one teacher and the number of children in school was 20. Farm No. 3, which had a population of 351, is situated near the town of Marandellas about 70 kilometres from Salisbury. A large variety of crops are grown on the farm and various types of livestock are reared. There was a junior primary school with four teachers, and the number of children in school was 200. Farm No. 4 with a population of 446 was by far the largest of them all. It is situated about 13 kilometres from Salisbury. The farm had a full primary school with six teachers and 240 pupils. It is mainly a dairy farm although maize and other crops are grown. Sheep and chickens are also reared.

The methods of study included a questionnaire survey and participant observation. I spent as much time as possible on each farm and participated in the social life of the community. Care was taken not to interfere with normal farm work. Beer drinks at weekends particularly proved to be both entertaining and informative. No worker refused to be interviewed.

Social Composition

The largest proportion (42,9 per cent) of the workers on the farms studied were Rhodesian; 41,1 per cent were Malawians; 12,8 per cent came from Mozambique; and 2,9 per cent were Zambians (table 1). These population groups were not evenly distributed throughout the farms but tended to concentrate on particular farms. Of the workers from Malawi 73,2 per cent were on Farm No. 4; 57,8 per cent of those from Rhodesia were on Farm No. 3; while 50 per cent of workers from Zambia were on Farm No. 2 and 40 per cent were on Farm No. 4. People from Mozambique were more or less evenly distributed throughout the farms.³

The tendency on the part of certain population groups to concentrate on

particular farms is due to a number of factors. One of these is the attitude of the farm owner or manager. One farm manager expressed a preference for Malawians because as he put it, "they are hard working and obedient people." Other managers, however, did not express a preference for any particular group of workers. Concentration of the different ethnic groups on particular farms may also be due to the tribal affiliation of the foreman (boss boy) through whom most workers must go in order to secure employment. One Malawian foreman was not in favour of many Rhodesian workers on his farm "because they are stubborn and difficult to control in the compound". Another foreman feared workers from Malawi because of "their strong belief in witchcraft. They can be dangerous." These, of course, are stereotypes, but nevertheless may influence the hiring patterns of different foremen. Another factor which appears to lead to the concentration of certain population groups on particular farms is the informal system of communication which develops between farm workers and work seekers in their home areas. Farm jobs are not usually formally advertised and thus the chances of getting them often depends on one's knowledge of such opportunities. When jobs become available on the farm people already working there send letters and verbal messages home inviting applicants. Some men travel to their home area with or without the knowledge of the farm owners to recruit men for the vacant jobs.

Labour Mobility

Most (85,1 per cent) of the workers interviewed had held other jobs before taking their present ones, 42,6 per cent of them previously worked on other European farms; 31,8 per cent were town workers; and 1,5 per cent worked in the tribal trust lands. The remainder held jobs in the game reserves and national parks (6,9 per cent), mining centres (2 per cent), and African farms (0,3 per cent) (table 2).

Many of the workers were not attracted to their present jobs by higher wages but took them because of sheer necessity. In fact, 56,2 per cent of those who previously worked elsewhere lost financially by taking their present jobs. At the time of this study 61,5 per cent of the former town workers were receiving lower wages than the ones they received previously; 33,0 per cent were receiving a higher wage; and 5,5 per cent were getting the same wage as they had in town. Among those who previously held jobs in other European farms 55,4 per cent were receiving lower wages than the ones they had attained; 34,2 per cent were getting a higher wage; and 10,4 per cent were receiving the same wages as they had attained in their previous employment. Similarly 43,2 per cent of those workers who held jobs in mines, game reserves and national parks, and tribal trust lands had lost financially by taking their present employment (table 3).

The reasons why the workers mentioned above left their previous employment were investigated. The majority (131) of the workers reported that they had accepted their present jobs only because there was no alternative. They left their previous jobs either because their employer died or left the country; the firm was closed or the staff was reduced in size; or were dismissed, and were finding it difficult to obtain other jobs at comparable or higher wages. Sixty-two people left their previous employment because of low pay; 41 went home to plough, to see relatives or attend rituals and were not re-engaged on return; 17 left because of fear of witchcraft; 16 because the employer was cruel; 8 could not find suitable married accommodation; 9 left because the job was unpleasant; and 8 left because of personal reasons such as joining the spouse (table 4).

The large number of people who terminated their employment because

they wanted to go home to attend rituals, to plough or to visit relatives, needs comment. Many employers complain that some African workers are notoriously prone to absent themselves from their jobs altogether, in order to attend to family affairs in their tribal homes. These employers do not always realise, however, that as long as an employee cannot foresee a permanent urban or farm career, he is bound to insist on maintaining his stake in his home area. Most workers have a very shrewd appreciation of the relative importance to themselves of farm, town and tribal area. Although they value the money they get from wage-labour they realise that at present there is no final security for them on the farms or in urban employment. In the event of unemployment, accident, ill health or old age, real security lies only within the tribal area. Thus in order to maintain his stake in the tribal area there are many obligations on which the worker cannot afford to default, such as attendance on ritual occasions, funerals and weddings. Absence on these occasions would be construed by village kinsmen as lack of solidarity and withdrawal of membership of the village.

Table 5 shows the length of time the workers have stayed in their present jobs. The majority (65,8 per cent) have been in their present jobs for less than five years. Only 17,7 per cent have worked on the same farms for over ten years. Workers from Malawi, Mozambique and Zambia have stayed longer on their present jobs than Rhodesian workers, although the difference is not great. If we compare the four farms, again the difference between them in the length of time the workers have stayed on them is not great although the larger farms have kept their workers longer than Farm No. 1.

Farm wages are shown on table 6. The majority (93 per cent) of the workers received less than \$21 per month. Seven per cent received \$21 or more per month. On the average Farm No. 4 offered better wages but did not give the workers weekly rations. Rations were given on Farms 1, 2 and 3. On two farms the ration consisted of mealie meal, meat, beans and salt; on the third farm workers were given mealie meal, onions, cabbages and fish.

Workers were asked to state what in their opinion makes a farm a good one to work on. Wages were mentioned by all the workers. Other factors mentioned by most workers include a school for the children, and conditions of work. Besides such items as food, clothing, furniture, radio and a bicycle, money is needed for the education of children and for the support of parents and other dependants in the home area. Asked to say what they would like their eldest son or daughter to be when grown up, 17 per cent chose nursing, 14,8 per cent chose teaching and 11,5 per cent said they would like their eldest child to become a doctor. Other occupations mentioned include clerical work (8,8 per cent) driving (7,1 per cent) engineering (3,3 per cent) and police work (3,3 per cent). A large number, however, said they did not know (table 7). While it was not possible to work out the exact amounts of money sent home each year, workers reported that they support parents and other dependants in the home area. Some have their wives and most of their children living in the rural area (tables 8, 9). The majority (82,5 per cent) of the workers would like to retire to their home area when their working days are over (table 10). Under conditions of work, the informants mentioned job security, existence of a school for the children, housing, paid leave, sick leave and sick pay.

Conclusion

In a paper on rural economy Danckwerts⁴ writes: "Nine out of ten African farm workers much prefer leisure to money as an incentive . . . more money

would spoil them—they have such simple needs that it would be spent on drink or other corrupting distractions . . . It is no use paying more money to people who do not yet have the need for it."

Danckwerts gives three reasons for this apparent lack of interest in money among farm workers. He argues that farm workers are less sophisticated than town workers. They have recently come out of the village, and the assured well-being enjoyed on a farm is luxury in itself. Secondly, farm workers see fewer worldly goods around them and are less tempted. "They have not yet developed the desire for much more than simple clothes and a bicycle." The third reason given is that on farms it is still customary to give rations as part of the wage which means that money becomes a luxury.

This study shows that many workers have not come to the present farms directly from the tribal trust lands. A large number have held jobs in towns at a much higher salary and are accustomed to a higher standard of living than their present one. Furthermore, many workers realise that there is no final security for them on the farms and hence the desire to maintain their land, cattle and dwellings in the rural home area. The study further shows that many parents want to educate their children. There are a few children from the farms who are at boarding schools. Three children from Farm No. 4 are at the university. Farm No. 4 has also produced a university graduate who now holds a relatively high post in government service. It is difficult, therefore, to accept the argument referred to above that money to many farm workers is a luxury.

The economic policy suggested by Danckwerts above is also fallacious in that underpayment will eventually lead to low productivity, need for more labour and higher overheads.

There will always be a certain amount of labour turnover on farms. Where there is a high turnover, however, it will be difficult to obtain some continuity in production since a new labour force has to be trained continually into the jobs they are supposed to do. It appears from this study that factors likely to keep the existing labour force on a farm are higher wages, a school for the children, suitable accommodation, job security, adequate annual leave and sick pay. There is a need for widening the Industrial Conciliation Act to include agriculture so that workers may feel more secure. There are a number of difficulties. There is the difficulty of defining the variety of jobs that an employee might be given. There is also the difficulty of enforcing the regulations and the fluctuating numbers employed.⁵ These problems are not unsurmountable.

It is hoped that a larger study will be mounted to test some of the findings reported in this study. It would be interesting, for example, to do a replication study of the same farms in order to determine actual labour mobility.

TABLE I
Origins of Population

Country of Origin	Farm No. 1		Farm No. 2		Farm No. 3		Farm No. 4		All Farms	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Rhodesia	13	39,4	26	41,3	85	84,2	23	15,8	147	42,9
Malawi	8	24,2	25	39,7	5	5,0	104	71,2	142	41,4
Mozambique	12	36,4	7	11,1	10	10,0	15	10,3	44	12,8
Zambia	—	—	5	8,0	1	1,0	4	2,7	10	2,9
TOTAL	33	100,0	63	100,1	101	100,0	146	100,0	343	100,0

TABLE 2
Place of Last Job Held

	Farm No. 1		Farm No. 2		Farm No. 3		Farm No. 4		All Farms	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
European farm	17	51,5	28	44,4	55	54,5	46	31,5	146	42,6
Town	6	18,2	12	19,0	30	29,7	61	41,8	109	31,8
Mine	1	3,3	3	4,8	1	1,0	2	1,4	7	2,0
Tribal Trust										
Land	—	—	—	—	1	1,0	4	2,7	5	1,5
African farm	—	—	—	—	1	1,0	—	—	1	0,3
Other	4	12,1	7	11,1	—	—	13	8,9	24	6,9
Never worked before	5	15,1	13	20,6	13	12,9	20	13,7	51	14,9
TOTAL	33	100,2	63	99,9	101	100,1	146	100,0	343	100,0

TABLE 3
Past and Present Wages

	<i>Past and Present Wages Compared</i>						
<i>Place of Previous Employment</i>	<i>No. getting higher wages</i>		<i>No. getting same wages</i>		<i>No. getting lower wages</i>		<i>Total</i>
European farm	50	(34,2)	15	(10,4)	81	(55,4)	146
Town	36	(33,0)	6	(5,5)	67	(61,5)	109
Other	10	(27,0)	11	(29,8)	16	(43,2)	37
TOTAL	96		32		164		292
Never worked elsewhere							51
							343

TABLE 4
Reasons for Leaving Previous Employment

<i>Reasons</i>	<i>No. of workers</i>
Lost previous job	131
Low pay	62
Wanted to go home	41
Witchcraft	17
Cruel employer	16
Unpleasant job	9
Poor accommodation	8
Personal reasons	8
	292

TABLE 5
Length of Stay

Years	Farm No. 1		Farm No. 2		Farm No. 3		Farm No. 4		All Farms	
	Rhodesians	Aliens	Rhodesians	Aliens	Rhodesians	Aliens	Rhodesians	Aliens	Rhodesians	Aliens
Less than 2 years	4 (33,3)	9 (50,0)	10 (38,5)	10 (27,0)	33 (40,7)	1 (6,3)	4 (18,2)	45 (36,9)	51 (36,2)	65 (33,7)
2-5 years	8 (66,7)	7 (38,9)	8 (30,8)	13 (35,1)	28 (34,6)	1 (6,3)	8 (36,4)	31 (25,4)	52 (36,9)	52 (26,9)
5-10 years	0	1 (5,6)	5 (19,2)	5 (13,5)	11 (13,6)	2 (12,5)	5 (22,7)	26 (21,3)	21 (14,9)	34 (17,6)
Over 10 years	0	1 (5,6)	3 (11,5)	9 (24,3)	9 (11,1)	12 (75,0)	5 (22,7)	20 (16,4)	17 (12,0)	42 (21,8)
	12 (100,0)	18 (100,0)	26 (100,0)	37 (100,0)	81 (100,0)	16 (100,0)	22 (100,0)	122 (100,0)	141 (100,0)	193 (100,0)
No information	1	2		4	4	1	1	1		

TABLE 6

Wages

<i>Wages</i>	<i>Farm No. 1</i>		<i>Farm No. 2</i>		<i>Farm No. 3</i>		<i>Farm No. 4</i>		<i>All Farms</i>	
	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>
Under \$10	25	78,1	51	81,0	80	79,2	67	45,9	223	65,2
\$10 to \$20	6	18,7	9	14,3	19	18,8	61	41,8	95	27,8
\$20 to \$40	1	3,1	3	4,8	2	2,0	7	4,8	13	3,8
Over \$40	—	—	—	—	—	—	11	7,5	11	3,2
TOTAL	32	99,9	63	100,1	101	100,0	146	100,0	342	100,0
No information	1									

TABLE 7

Plans for Child's Future

<i>Occupation</i>	<i>Responses</i>	
	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>
Nurse	31	17,0
Teacher.....	27	14,8
Doctor	21	11,5
Clerk	16	8,8
Driver	13	7,1
Engineer	6	3,3
Policeman	6	3,3
Welder	1	0,5
Carpenter	1	0,5
Minister of Religion	1	0,5
Orderly	1	0,5
Don't know	58	31,9
TOTAL	182	99,7
No information	161	

TABLE 8

Sex Ratios in Broad Age Categories
(males per 100 females)

<i>Age Group</i>	<i>Farm No. 1</i>	<i>Farm No. 2</i>	<i>Farm No. 3</i>	<i>Farm No. 4</i>	<i>All Farms</i>
0-14	125	84	104	89	100
15-29	115	165	165	100	136
30-44	260	159	147	286	213
45 years and older	114	344	269	200	231

TABLE 9
Marital Status
 (People over 14 years of age)

<i>Marital Status</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>
Single	127	22,8
Divorced	11	2,0
Widowed	8	1,4
Married but spouse away	83	14,9
Married and living with spouse	329	59,0
TOTAL	558	100,1

TABLE 10
Plans for Retirement

<i>Plans</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>
Will return home	283	82,5
Will settle in town	19	5,5
Will die here	10	2,9
Will buy a farm	5	1,5
Don't know	14	4,1
No information	12	3,5
TOTAL	343	100,0

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FOOTNOTES

¹The four farms were chosen mainly for their relative position to the city of Salisbury so that fieldwork could be supervised from the University. I picked at random 3 farms from the telephone directory from each of the four districts of Salisbury, Marandellas, Mazoe and Norton, and wrote to the farm owners or managers asking for permission to work on their farms. There were two refusals. Four managers did not reply. The study was limited to four farms because of financial considerations. Only European farms are included in the study. African farms would require a separate study.

²Data on family life, medical beliefs and practices, religion, family planning and marriage have not been used in the present study.

³Marriages between the different population groups take place. 40,0 per cent of the marriages were between local women and alien men; 32,0 per cent were between alien men and alien women; 20,0 per cent were within local Rhodesian groups; and 8,0 per cent were between local men and alien women.

⁴Danckwerts, B. A. 1962 A Farmer's View: Paper read at the Major Management Residential Conference, Victoria Falls Hotel, August 1962.

⁵*Rhodesia Herald*, Wednesday, October 4, 1972.



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